Above the Rapids

IT was the Missisippi River—not the great Father of waters, but a small stream of the same name in Eastern Ontario—hurrying petulantly over a rocky fall before it emptied itself into the Ottawa.

Not a great many miles from its mouth, and just below the small town of Almonte, there was a stretch a mile and a half long between the big falls running the numerous woolen mills of Almonte and the rapids below.

This sunny July afternoon there was scarcely a ripple on it. Out in the middle the water was a deep blue in color, while close to the shore, where the bottom showed clear in the sunlight, it was a pale amber.

The banks sheered perpendicularly upward, and were covered to the very water's edge with a thick growth of straight, slender birch and popular saplings, with here and there a tall pine or stout cedar towering, old and tired-looking, from amid this fresh, vigorous young life.

A bend in the river hid the town from sight. There was not a habitation of any kind visible, and it would have been hard to find a quieter or more deserted-looking spot than this pretty little stretch of water.

Most of the townspeople who owned boats kept them on the upper part of the river, above the falls, where there were several miles of river suitable for boating purposes, so that this quiet bit below was not often disturbed by the sound of a paddle, and in the autumn the wild ducks and the cranes had it mostly to themselves.

But this was only July, and there were no more important birds than a couple of kingfishers to be disturbed this afternoon, when a skiff, containing a small party of young folks, rounded the point and glided along the shady side.

The skiff belonged to Mr. Meredith, the owner of the largest woolen mill in Almonte.

The two little boys of six and seven in it were his sons, and the slender young girl of sixteen, who handled the oars so gracefully, was his niece, Helen Gilmour, from Montreal.

"Oh, boys, isn't it pretty here?" cried Helen, enthusiastically, resting on her oars, and letting her soft gray eyes wander idly over the peaceful scene.

"It's awful quiet, Helen," answered George, the elder of the two lads.

"It feels like church," added Reggie, the younger, in a whisper.

"Quiet! Why, boys, where are your ears? listen to all the birds chirping to each other in the woods. Can't you hear the cat-bird call? And, listen, there's a squirrel chattering. Perhaps she's telling her little ones that she has a good supper for them."

"Like our mother," said Reggie.

"And can't you hear the swish of the rapids and the roar of the water over the dam below?"

"Yes. We'll soon be able to see the rapids. They's coming close," replied George.

"Indeed they are close! See how strong the current is! We can't go much further."

"Would us feel bad if we went over the rapids?" asked Reggie, his big blue eyes fastened wonderingly on the shining water.

"Indeed 'us' would, Reggie; for I don't think there would be much of us left to tell the tale, especially if we took in the dam. I'm going to land here and see if I can find a few raspberries up on the hill, and then we must go home, for it is getting late."

The bow of the boat grated against the sloping shore. Jumping out, Helen pulled the skiff up a little, and then began scrambling up the bank.

"Keep still, boys, and I'll bring you back some berries," she called out, tossing her long braid of brown hair over her shoulder, and pulling herself nimbly up through the thick young trees.

But the pretty girlish figure, in the dark blue serge skirt and white blouse, had hardly been lost to their view among the green shadows before it entered into the boys' heads that it would be great sport to paddle away for a bit by themselves; and, scarcely had they thought it, before they pushed the boat out—an easy matter—off the sharply-shelving shore.

In a few minutes they were out in midstream, and charmed to find that the skiff was moving down stream without any effort on their part.

Helen was only a short time gone, but it was long enough for the boat to get a considerable distance off. The boys had begun to feel frightened, for now the noise of the rapids sounded loud in their ears, their little faces had grown pale, and they were looking wistfully back at the shore they had left.

Helen saw it all. The boat with the two trembling little figures in it bearing toward the other side, where the current was strongest; the smooth, swiftly running water; the broken line beyond, where the rapids began.

She knew that a little further on the waves grew big and white-capped and tumbled angrily over jagged rocks, and beyond that again the water flowed deeply for a short space, then gathered itself together to dash over the dam.

Even if the boys could get safely through the rapids, they would surely be drowned at the dam.

A light wind had sprung up, and it was blowing down the stream. The poplars fringing the opposite shore shivered whitely in it, and the noise of the rapids sounded now like a ravenous clamoring to Helen.

She could swim a little, and, quick almost as she took in the situation, she divested herself of her outer garments and jumped into the water.

The river was not more than a hundred feet wide at this point, but Helen had never before attempted more than a dozen strokes at a time.

She struck out boldly, however, and made good progress. The boys' faces began to brighten. They leaned over the edge of the skiff and watched her anxiously.

On through the shining waters Helen came bravely, her head well back, her teeth set; but it was hard work. She was soon tired, and in a little while she began to fear that she could keep up no longer. But she must reach the boys.

They were getting near to the rapids now, and she was still some distance from the boat.

The hungry boom of the water was ringing so loudly in her ears that she could not hear the sobs of the children, but she seemed to see them lying cold in death before her.

"Oh, for strength!" prayed the brave girl, unconsciously straining her aching limbs in a further effort.

If she could keep up a little longer she would reach the boat. Helen dared not look towards the rapids; they were perilously near now.

A few minutes more and she would be too late to save her cousins—too tired to save herself, but of that she did not think. She nerved herself for a last supreme spurt.

"Oh, Helen, dear Helen! Oh, Helen, we loves you!"

She had caught on to the boat, and the boys were laughing now for very gladness. The boat was only a few yards from the other shore, but the water was running strongly.

Half-swimming, half-pushing, however, Helen at last succeeded in getting safe on to the bank; then she tumbled in a little, limp, wet heap among the tangled brushwood, and, girl-like, burst out crying.

The boys clambered out of the boat and put their arms about her.

"Don't cry, Helen—don't please!" begged George. "You was as brave as a boy, and when I'm a big man I'll give you a lovely gold ring and lots of things," he ended, comfortingly.

Helen laughed, and the boys were so pleased that they laughed, too; and laughed again when the woods echoed back their mirth.

They rowed across for Helen's clothes, and then in the soft summer twilight—for the day was ending now—pulled slowly homeward.

WONDERS OF COMETS

COMETS are among the most fascinating bodies in astronomy. The suddenness with which they flame into sky, the enormous size of their fiery trains, the swiftness of their flight, the strange and mysterious forms they assume, and their rapid departure, seem to partake of the marvelous.

The term comet signifies a hairy body. A comet usually consists of three parts—the nucleus, a bright point in the centre of the head; the coma (hair), the cloud-like mass surrounding the nucleus, and the tail, a luminous train, extending generally in the direction from the sun. There are a number of comets without the tail and others with several, while some have not even a nucleus.

There are marked points of difference between comets and planets. The planets move in the same direction from west to east, which is astronomically called "direct motion," but the comet's movements are often from east to west. The orbits of planets are nearly circular, while the orbits of the comets, on the other hand, present every variety of eccentricity.

Comets are very numerous. Arago having estimated that there are 17,500,000 within the solar system, basing his calculation on the number known to exist between the sun and Mercury. Of this vast number, however, few are visible to the naked eye.

The calculation of the time of the return of a comet is no easy matter. Of those that move in a clearly elliptical path, by which is meant an oval track, their movements have been so accurately estimated that it is possible to predict their exact place in the starry vault on any given day and hour.

The other comets never return, or, at least, not for centuries hence. They may be paying our sun their first visit, or they may have first arrived so long ago that we have no record; or even may have come before man was created on this earth.

It is easy to see that, under these circumstances, it is extremely difficult to determine the times of these wanderers; yet, in spite of all this, some have been tracked into space far beyond range of the telescope. For example, the comet of 1844 is announced to pay us a visit in the year our Lord 101,844, while the comet of 1744 is expected back in the year 124,427.

One of the chief points of interest to astronomers about Halley's comet, which was here in 1910, is that it is the first comet whose period of revolution was satisfactorily established.

Doctor Halley, on examining the accounts of the great comets of 1531, 1607 and 1682, suspected that they were only the reappearance of the same comet, whose period he fixed at seventy-five years. He finally ventured to predict the return of the comet about the end of 1758 and the beginning of 1759. Of course, Halley could not live to see whether his prediction was true, but other astronomers watched eagerly for it. The first to discover it was a peasant near Dresden, who saw it in the heavens on Christmas night, 1758.

The comet came again in 1835. It has been identified as one which come in 1456, and one in 1378, which were observed and recorded by Chinese astronomers. It is conjectured that it also is identical with that of 1230, a comet mentioned in 1066 by Hali Ben Rodoan, that of 855 and finally a comet seen about fifty-two years before our era.

Comets have been alternately regarded with terror and welcome in the popular mind. Halley's comet, when seen in England, in 1066, was looked upon with dread, as the forerunner of victory for William the Conqueror. Its awe-inspiring visit was commemorated by the hand of Queen Matilda, in the famous Bayeux tapestry.

Its arrival in 1456 was supposed to indicate the success of Mahomet II, who had already taken Constantinople and threatened the whole Christian world. Turk and Christian alike were scared by it, and Pope Calixtus III ordered extra Ave Marias to be repeated by everybody, and also the church bells to ring daily at noon. In 1233 it was considered the precursor of the death of Philip Augustus.

Practical Mary

Mary's new mistress thought she had detected in the maid such an interest in objects of art as no other servant had ever displayed. Pleased with Mary's intelligence, her mistress showed her the best points in pictures and bric-abrac, and at the end of a brief art lecture asked which object she like best. "This one, ma'am," replied Mary, pointing with her feather-duster to the armless Venus of Milo. "This is getting more and more interesting," thought the lady. "Here is Mary showing really high artistic taste." "And why did you like the Venus best, Mary?" she asked, anxious to hear Mary's estimate of the famous statue.

"Why, sure, ma'am, 'tis the aisiest to doost," replied Mary.